



Tailored Risk Management

Geopolitical Analysis

**Unrest in Bangladesh:
The Aftermath of Sheikh
Hasina's Ouster**

Introduction and Background

Since Bangladesh gained its independence from West Pakistan in 1971 it has fluctuated back and forth from democratic to military rule and vice versa. During the period of democracy from 1971–75 and 1991 onwards, power was minimally dispersed, almost entirely remaining in the hands of the Sheikh family. Mujibur ('the father of independence') was President from 1971–75 while his daughter Hasina was president from 1996 to 2001 and again from 2009–2024. The dominance of the Sheikh family and the Awami League (hereafter AL) has called democratic legitimacy back into question since 2014 following three deeply flawed elections. Democratic backsliding has become increasingly common over the last decade, noticeably in Asia, evidenced not only with Bangladesh and its 2014, 2018, and 2024 elections and a 15-year incumbent administration but also in neighbouring Myanmar and Thailand. Such backsliding poses a real threat of impending autocracy, and has not gone unnoticed by Bangladeshis, adding tailwinds to protests and civil unrest. The ousting of Shiekh Hasina on the 5 of August is a pivotal moment in Bangladesh's political history: it can either rebuild and reform its democracy, slowly and surely via an interim government (led currently by Muhammad Yunus) or return to its continuous cycle of corruption and democratic backsliding. The post-Hasina period is critical for its large and youthful population, upholding political relations with neighbouring superpowers and continuing economic growth. Yet it remains necessary to understand the political context leading to this current situation and the probable future impacts that align with such context.

Civil Unrest and Hasina's Departure

Bangladesh like other countries in Asia has made its long journey to democracy over the years. However, after Hasina's second electoral victory in 2009, it became apparent that she would be reluctant to recede her position as the most powerful individual in the country. Her descent into autocracy began most visibly in 2011 when she unilaterally initiated the 15th amendment into the Bangladesh Constitution, effectively removing the role of caretaker governments meant to conduct elections during the electoral period. Thereby giving any incumbent increasingly more control over the running of elections, benefiting Sheikh Hasina's administration despite dissent from the opposition, voters, and society. This has effectively led to three flawed elections in which the AL has dominated with large majorities and the opposition party: Bangladesh Nationalist Party (hereafter the BNP) boycotting, not dissimilar to the actions taken by herself and the AL several decades earlier. These contested elections are evidence of a flawed democracy as they were neither free nor fair, taking place without the role of a prominent opposition. Elections like these are futile, only offering one true option, effectively turning Bangladesh's multiparty system into a one-party rule system.



Election commandeering can also be seen with the widespread allegations of suspected ballot stuffing alongside the mass incarceration of opposition party members after the rally on 28 October 2023. These arrests directly disabled many of its members from standing for election. A low turnout of 40 per cent (although critics and international media claim it was much lower) in the January 2024 elections reinforces an absence of democratic legitimacy, as over half of the population neglected to participate and subsequently didn't vote for the AL and Sheikh Hasina. A lack of options for the Bangladeshi people provoked large displays of civil unrest and disruption prior to the January elections as civilians set fires to poll booths and buildings used for polling in protest. Such violence was concentrated in large urban centres, particularly Dhaka.

Hasina also receded into autocracy by enjoying unquestioned authority, aided by her packing the civil service with current allies of the AL and descendants of those who fought for independence back in 1971. She also commandeered the judicial system by using promotion and demotion, rendering complete control over a system that is nominally a separate and independent body. This meant that with her managing of elections through the 15th amendment and the opposition refusing to sit, she obtained control over all three branches of state. Finally, the curfew and internet shutdowns imposed after the protests on 19 July directly undermined the freedoms of movement, assembly, and speech, displaying the abuse of democracy by limiting participation.

Protests are common in Bangladesh, in fact there have been numerous large protests such as those in December 2022 when tens of thousands of protesters were in the streets of Dhaka, demanding the resignation of Sheikh Hasina. Three further large-scale protests took place before the January election, all anti-government related. However, the ones sparked by university students from July to August have been the most significant, leading to the ousting of Hasina, forcing her to seek refuge in neighbouring India. Protests first began in July largely peacefully by university students as they responded to the reinstatement by the Supreme Court of the controversial quota system. This quota system allocated 30% of civil service jobs to the relatives of those who fought in the war for independence. Students disliked this discriminatory and elitist programme as it meant that they had even less of a chance of obtaining a desirable government job. With increasing numbers of students going to university each year, graduate employment under Hasina had not risen at a similar nor equivalent rate. This was only compounded by increased numbers of educated youth facing higher levels of unemployment than those who were less educated. These peaceful protests did address the student concerns with the quotas as the Supreme Court decreased the quota percentage to 5% for the relatives of liberation fighters. Yet the harsh response to protests including mass incarcerations and a heavy-handed public order response galvanised the protests and they only gained further traction.



The acceleration of the protests was a crisis of Hasina and her administration's own making. Rather than address the protestors' grievances, Hasina and several of her senior officials branded the protesters as terrorists, only to encourage more people to join ranks with the protesters and further inflate the anti-government movement. Police initially tried to disperse crowds with rubber pellet bullets but when this wasn't effective more violent methods were utilised. 04 August was the most violent day, reaching a death toll of approximately one hundred people as live rounds were fired into crowds. This only swelled crowds further, with protestors scheduling a final march on the capital a day later. The military reportedly refused to cooperate with Hasina's violent orders, making it clear that her 15-year rule was coming to an end. She subsequently fled the country, reportedly travelling to India to seek shelter from the protestors.

However, civil disorder did not come to a complete halt after Sheikh Hasina's resignation. Some of the victims of police brutality have become the perpetrators of violence, storming into Hasina's previous residence, committing arson, and beating the police and suspected supporters of the AL. With the police reluctant to step in after public outrage for their response to the prior protests, violence seems poised to continue.

Overcoming the Legacy of Hasina

Hasina's departure leaves the interim government and Muhammad Yunus (informally elected as interim leader by the students) with the large task of political and social reform and renewal. With the civil service currently packed with former allies of Hasina, Yunus not being democratically elected himself, the judicial system heavily politicised and several departments of the police acting with total indemnity, the issues facing the country seem insurmountable. And yet Bangladeshis are hopeful for a new future. Some change has commenced with accountability measures: the Army chief has enforced the message that there will be a 'trial for every killing', evidenced by multiple murder cases already filed against Hasina. The ousting of other senior ministers, allies, and leaders of the AL enables the interim government to start afresh with Yunus appointing a new chief justice, and a new central bank governor who has already decided to raise interest rates. Instating new leaders quickly enables reformation and management of the country to take place. However, the constitutional changes such as the 15th Amendment put into place by the AL will be difficult to remove as the interim government has dissolved Parliament, this amendment now won't be able to be removed until the next Parliament sits and with a 2/3rd majority.

Whilst the AL limited civil liberties and supported the mismanagement of the state and the economy, they were sympathetic to minority religious groups like Hindus, unlike the opposition party BNP and other more conservative parties. This has now become an issue



as the public has linked Hinduism with the AL, subsequently leading to ethnic violence in the wake of her ousting. The interim government must find a way to manage the violence, as not only is it critical to prevent ethnic conflict but also necessary to protect bilateral relations with India, a predominantly Hindu nation. Hasina's departure to India for sanctuary and India's prior support of the AL only amplifies civic discontent in Bangladesh for its neighbouring country. This must be managed by the new interim government to maintain stable relations which are already deteriorating: Hasina's resignation triggered the Indian government to pull all non-essential staff from the Indian embassy. India is a powerful ally of Bangladesh; current and future governments cannot afford to isolate it. India is not only growing to be one of the most powerful economies in the BRICS group, but also currently supplies Bangladesh with vital power deals. The Indian government also relies on Bangladesh for revenue as they currently have annual trade worth USD 13b and were due to start talks about a free trade agreement, after recent events this will most likely be delayed. Hasina's choice to rely on India over China in an integral and costly water management scheme, now also puts excess stress on the need to maintain political relations between the neighbouring countries as Chinese alternatives will not be as forthcoming in the future, for upcoming governments.

Whilst the quota system has been reduced, Bangladesh will still need to work on creating desirable jobs for their well-educated youth, as levels of postgraduate employment remain low with an estimated 30 million young Bangladeshis unemployed. This threatens further civil discontent and action if improvement does not materialise, or mass migration as we have seen in the past to countries like the UAE. Lower-paid, unskilled jobs in agriculture and industry have limited appeal to the educated youth. The perceived exploitation of the garment and textile workers is also a key cause of civil unrest, evidenced recently by Amnesty International reporting 35,900 to 44,490 garment workers protesting minimum wage and poor working conditions in October and November 2023. The management and attempted containment of protests was harsh and lethal force was used by police, as protesters were sprayed with water cannons, tear gas and rubber pellets. There was additionally a death toll, though not as large as the protests of July and August 2024. Protests and a heavy-handed response appear set to continue unless systematic change takes place.

Conflict and civil disturbances within Bangladeshi refugee camps located in Cox Bazar are becoming more prominent. Sheikh Hasina supported the hosting of over 960,000 Rohingya refugees from the Rakhine state of Myanmar since 2017 (as she was a refugee for a period of time) but their plight has been neglected by the AL in recent years. The new interim government will need to address the declining conditions in these camps before violence



spirals further, especially already facing allegations that the anti-government movement against Myanmar has stationed its base in these camps and is recruiting from such camps.

The Challenges Ahead

Although there has been considerable upheaval within national society, policy and government, the Bangladesh population will remain resilient. As the majority has succeeded with their main aim of removing Sheikh Hasina, the anti-Awami League agenda will most likely subside, therefore decreasing civic unrest within urban hubs. There is widespread hope and majoritarian support surrounding the new interim government and Muhammad Yunus, but as with any new administration, it will face a multitude of challenges and will have little time to adjust and assimilate. Such challenges as mentioned previously being; ethnic tensions, maintaining relations with India and finally removing the entrenched AL allies within the bureaucracy will all need action simultaneously, putting a large amount of stress on a deteriorated system. Before stability can be achieved the nation must overcome multiform challenges, which be a true test of the new government's ability to rise to the table and attempt to fix what was so severely broken by Hasina and her AL.



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